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ABSTRACT

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METHODS FOR STUDYING SENSITIVE FAMILY TOPICS*

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METHODS FOR STUDYING SENSITIVE FAMILY TOPICS

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ABSTRACT

Investigators of taboo or sensitive topics in the area of human relations tend to encounter similar problems. If the focus of the research is on an issue which is illegal (e.g. career study of professional gunmen, homosexual encounters in public places), or embarrassing (sexual behavior), or sensitive (suicide or death), researchers typically find it difficult to locate subjects for their research, to establish rapport with the subjects in order to collect data, and to collect valid and reliable data on the topic. The problems encountered by students of family relations who wish to study sensitive or taboo topics are compounded by the very nature of the family as a social institution and social group. Because the family is a private institution (Aries, 1962; Laslett, 1973), most family behavior occurs in settings where researchers cannot make observations. In addition, the private nature of the family often makes family members reluctant to talk about events which occur in their families. Finally, numerous behaviors may take place in families which are illegal or embarrassing to talk about to a non-family member. Privacy and intimacy in the family serve as major roadblocks which confront researchers who are interested in examining sensitive issues such as child abuse, child neglect, incest, sexual abuse of children, sexual behavior between family members, homosexuality, rape (marital rape), coerced sexual relations or sexual behavior which one partner finds repulsive, or other delicate issues.

This paper examines the major problems which confront researchers who wish to study sensitive topics in family relations. The major obstacles typically encountered are 1) locating subjects; 2) getting cooperation; and 3) obtaining valid and reliable data. A second section of the paper discusses methods of overcoming these obstacles. One subsection lists and discusses sampling techniques which have been proposed and/or implemented to study such "taboo" topics as sexual behavior, homosexuality, family violence, and child abuse. The next subsection discusses methods of data collection. Standard methods such as observations and interviews tend to require considerable work if researchers are to get the cooperation of the subjects. Techniques such as the funneling technique, the random response technique, projective techniques, and experimental designs are reviewed in this section. The last subsection examines problems of validity and reliability. This section reports on procedures which have been designed to validate data collected on sensitive topics and also discusses validation studies done on sensitive issues. The third section examines additional problems in sensitive issue research such as contingencies posed in federally funded research by the guidelines for the protection of human subjects.

There is a dilemma which confronts social scientists and students of family relations when they wish to examine behavior where long standing taboos exist against discussing such behavior publically or with one's intimates. On the one hand, sensitive issues or "taboo topics" (Farberow, 1966) bid for scientific attention for a number of reasons: they are intrinsically interesting, allow scientists to analyze and refute conventional wisdoms or myths about human behavior, concern regions of human behavior where knowledge gaps exist, and are fundamentally important for improving our insight and knowledge about non-sensitive social phenomena. Yet, at the same time, by virtue of the fact that a sensitive topic is typically one where taboos usually exist which prohibit talking about the issue, sensitive issues and taboo topics pose major obstacles for researchers interested in examining them. The most utilized tools of social research are interviews, questionnaires, and observations; yet, people often feel socially constrained from talking about taboo topics let alone allowing a stranger to observe sensitive behavior. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to collect empirical data on issues such as homosexuality, sexual behavior, child abuse, wife abuse, incest, etc.

This paper explores the issue of studying sensitive family topics. The first section reviews the field of "taboo topic research" and discusses some of the problems and solutions which have been implemented in studying suicide, homosexuality, deviant behavior, and sexual behavior. The next sections review potentially sensitive family topics, the major problems confronting researchers who would like to examine these phenomena, and finally, some solutions to these problems are presented.

PROBLEMS IN STUDYING SENSITIVE ISSUES

The problems and obstacles confronted in research designed to examine sensitive issues vary according to the purpose of the research. For instance, a researcher who is concerned with estimating the incidence or prevelance of a particular sensitive behavior (such as drug usage, child abuse, homosexuality, other variations of sexual behavior, ect.) is faced with the likelihood of under-reporting by respondents who try to answer with socially desirable responses or who do not want to admit to illegal behavior due to doubts about the actual role of the researcher. Researchers engaged in descriptive or explanatory research on sensitive issues must wrestle with problems of generalizability of their findings since subjects who are willing to discuss taboo topics are likely to be systematically different from subjects who either do not want to be interviewed or fill out a questionnaire, or from subjects who cannot be reached using traditional survey designs. Polsky, for example, (1969) criticizes work on deviance and criminal behavior by stating that most data are collected on "caught" populations such as prison or jail inmates. Polsky argues that this method of securing data focuses on the "unsuccessful" deviant while missing entirely those individuals who commit deviant acts but do not get caught or labeled (Polsky: 1969).

While the issues involved in sensitive research vary from study to study, there are three major areas where problems must be solved. First, subjects must be located or sources of data need to be obtained. Secondly, cooperation needs to be obtained from the subjects or the data source. Lastly, there are problems of validity and reliability of the data.

Locating Subjects

The first problem is contacting subjects. It would have been difficult

for Kinsey and his associates (during the 1940's) in their study of sexual behavior (1948) to simply ring doorbells and ask each randomly selected respondent for his or her sexual biography. Similarly, Ned Polsky (1969) would have confronted problems asking randomly selected professional gunmen for their career history--not to mention the problem of locating individuals who profess to be professional gunmen! And certainly, Laud Humphreys was not keen on the notion of beginning an in-home interview by telling his subject that he had chosen him for the survey because he had observed him engaged in a homosexual act in a public rest room (1970:41).

Sampling Strategies. There have been a number of strategies invoked in the study of emotionally charged issues. Kinsey avoided individual self-selection bias through a technique titled "group sampling" where all members of a functioning group such as the P.T.A., a classroom, a fraternity, ect. were interviewed if a majority voted in favor of participation. Where group memberships were not common and to achieve social status and occupation variation, individuals were sampled in hospitals, hiring halls, and prisons. A second method of sampling is "snowball sampling" where the researcher locates one subject who fits the desired characteristics or who is a member of a special group, interviews the subject, and then asks for the subject to recommend the researcher to another similar individual. Erich Goode (1969) used this technique to acquire a sample of multiple drug users and Polsky used the same approach in studying professional gunmen (1969).

The benefit of group sampling and snowballing is that it provides the researcher with lists of subjects which s/he can draw from. The Kinsey 100% "group sample" has the advantage of avoiding individual self-selection. In the case of snowball sampling the advantage is that in recommending subjects to the researcher, the informant can also give the new subject the recommendation of the researcher and

the project. Since a main feature of taboo topic research is suspicion of the investigator by others (Shneidman, 1966) snowballing and group sampling aid in opening doors for researchers.

Investigators have recommended various strategies for approaching subjects. Hooker (1966) recommends learning any specialized language or argot of the subjects while Polsky points out how to blend into the subject's environment while retaining the critical difference between investigator and subject (1969: 121-130).

Rapport. After making contact with subjects, the researcher's next task is to conduct the research in a climate of low subject reactivity. The main guideline proposed by researchers in emotional areas is the necessity of establishing rapport with the subject. Kinsey (1948), Polsky (1969), and Blum (1970) make the point that the key aspect of the interview is to establish rapport with the subject so that the researcher has the full confidence and trust of the subject. To achieve this confidence and trust, the researcher must be able to present a credible professional image of himself and the project and guarantee the confidentiality of the subject's responses (Pomeroy, 1966).

Although individual researchers provide special recipes for establishing rapport, one similar approach in all data collection enterprises is to begin by discussing common interests with the subject. Polsky (1969) recommends beginning the research by engaging in leisure activities with subjects, for example playing pool, playing cards, drinking, talking sports, ect. Kinsey also explains that an effective method of establishing rapport is to begin with common interests (1948:47).

Another means of establishing rapport in certain projects is to become a participant in the activity in question. Thus, Laud Humphreys (1970), in

attempting to study homosexual acts in public places, actually became a participant in the action by serving as a lookout for the participants in public men's rooms.

The researchers who have discussed problems of sensitive area research assert that after establishing contact and rapport, the investigator has solved the major problem of reactivity and distortion. In fact, most state that once trust and confidence have been established it is sometimes difficult to get the subject to stop talking about the taboo area since the interview, questionnaire, or observation can serve as a cathartic release for the subject.

While we do not doubt the accuracy of these discussions of rapport building, it does seem that the authors are placing a great deal of weight and faith in establishing rapport. Rapport in and of itself may pave the way for research, but it does not fully address the critical issues of validity and reliability.

Validity and Reliability. The final important issue in sensitive area research is that of validity and reliability. Perhaps the most persistent question and criticism researchers hear when they study issues and topics which are emotionally charged and deal with areas where there are legal and moral taboos, is "how do you know they were telling you the truth?" While researchers operate on the assumption that few people would respond that they do engage in morally or normatively disapproved acts (incest, child beating, homosexuality) when they do not, there is a great suspicion that most people who do engage in covert deviance or other emotionally charged behaviors will not readily admit it to a researcher. Humphreys, in fact suggests that covert deviants wear the "breastplate of righteousness" which presents a "holier than thou" presentation of self (1970).

There have been some researchers who have developed techniques for cutting

through the "social acceptability" barrier in sensitive area research. Kinsey and his colleagues pioneered the "direct approach interview." The Kinsey researchers (1948:53) argued that the burden of denial should be on the respondent and that the interviewer should not ask questions which make it easy to deny certain behaviors. Thus, the Kinsey group began each interview assuming that every type of sexual activity had been engaged in by the respondent, and asked questions such as "When did you last masturbate?" rather than "Do you ever masturbate?"

While there are techniques discussed in the literature for improving validity and reliability, few researchers have engaged in systematic tests of the reliability and validity of their instruments.

THE FAMILY: SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN SENSITIVE AREA RESEARCH

Sensitive issues aside, the family is a complex and difficult social group/social institution to study. For one thing, families are made up of individuals occupying multiple statuses and enacting multiple roles. Thus, a researcher who interviews a family member or requests that a member of a family fill out a questionnaire is collecting data from an individual who is at the intersection of many and varied roles (mother, wife, worker, daughter, sister, ect.). Secondly, "family" as a group or institution is as much a matter of subjective perception as it is an objective group membership. As Laing states, "to be in the same family is to feel the same 'family' inside (1971:13)." And since a number of individuals make up a family, there are numerous subjective perceptions of "family", interactions, and individuals. Thus, while there may be a shared "reality" of family which can be studied (Berger and Kellner, 1964), there are also varying subjective perceptions depending on whether the observer is a "son",

"father", "mother", etc.

The numerous roles, statuses, and shared perceptions complicate research into the family, but there are two additional facets of the family which further impinge on research and which create major contingencies in the study of sensitive topics. First, the family is essentially a private institution (Laslett, 1973; Aries, 1962). Secondly, the family is an intimate social group.

Privacy

A major contingency in the field of family studies is that the family is a private institution. As such, most relevant family interaction takes place behind closed doors, out of sight of neighbors, friends, and social scientists. In order to study the family, most social scientists have made use of methods and instruments which allow them to penetrate the walls of the family without actually going into the home. Nye and Bayer (1963) found that interviews and questionnaires accounted for 52 percent of research data gathered from 1947-1951 (as analyzed from articles on the family reported in the AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW, AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY, SOCIAL FORCES, AND MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIVING). Thirty-one percent of research data gathered came from census records and articles. In the five year period from 1957-1961, 70 percent of the data was gathered using survey instruments (interviews and questionnaires) and 13 percent was drawn from census records and articles. For the same two periods, no data was gathered using observation from 1947-1951, and only .5 percent of data gathered came from observations in the 1957-1961 time frame. This heavy dependence on interviews and questionnaires is a reflection of the general trend in sociology to use interviews and questionnaires (Phillips reports that 90 percent of the articles published in the AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW and THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY collected data using interviews and questionnaires--1971:1). Never-

theless, the reliance on survey methods rather than field methods in the study of the family also indicates that the private nature of the family makes it difficult to employ standard observational or participant observation techniques. The exceptions are few, and often involve a researcher moving in with a family to live with them as Jules Henry did in his study of families of psychotic children (1971).

While researchers have been allowed entrance into families to study global family interaction patterns and some researchers have moved in as boarders in households while pursuing community studies (Whyte, 1955), it would be difficult to gain admittance into a household for the purposes of observing child beating or varieties of sexual behavior. Moreover, the private nature of the family also means that certain rooms are devoted to specific activities. Thus, while a researcher might be allowed into a home, it is beyond belief that s/he could enter the bedroom or bathroom for the purpose of making observations.

In conclusion, the private nature of the family puts a premium on methods which require the family member to recount previous histories or events and report them on a questionnaire or in an interview. Even with these methodological possibilities, there is still the problem of intimacy which blocks access to certain behavioral and attitudinal domains.

Intimacy

A second important aspect of the family is that the relationships between and among family members are intimate. Thus, unlike other social groups, family structure arises out of intimate interactions. The special nature of intimate relationships tend to produce strong pressures against discussing family matters with those outside of the family. Parents often reprimand children for discussing

their family matters with school counselors, friends, and neighbors. Likewise, the tendency to view family matters as sacred, private, and intimate, makes many individuals reluctant to talk about their family life with outsiders. In fact, this reluctance often becomes an adament stand against nosey, uninvited intrusions of social scientists, market researchers, and the like.

THE FAMILY: SENSITIVE ISSUES

This section briefly discusses issues and topics within the family which are important and relevant, but present obstacles to research by virtue of the fact that they are either behaviors which are illegal, have taboos surrounding them which inhibit discussion, or are emotionally charged.

One of the most widely discussed sensitive issues in the past few years has been child abuse. This topic became a focal issue in the early sixties--propelled by a ground breaking paper by Kenry Kempe and his associates (1962). But, by 1976 we still do not have an adequate understanding of child abuse. Research which tests hypotheses is rare, causal models are overly simplified, and theory building research is often inadequately conceptualized. Moreover, there is currently no reliable estimate of how many children are abused and neglected each year in this country--a situation which led the Office of Child Development/National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect to sponsor a National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and neglect beginning July 1, 1976.

A related topic is wife-abuse. As with child abuse, scant information exists on the incidence and causes of wife abuse. But even more importantly, wife abuse had been ignored to such a degree that almost no descriptive data exist on this topic.

A third issue is sexual abuse and incest. Most text books on the family devote numerous pages to discussing the extent and nature of incest taboos in various societies and cultures. These discussions attempt to explain why such taboos exist and what form they take. The examination of taboos related to incest masks the fact that exceptions to the rule abound. Huerta (1976) has discussed reasons why incest has been a neglected topic for social scientists and the fact that incest and sexual abuse remain the most underresearched aspects of child abuse and child neglect.

Forty-nine of the fifty states have laws on the books which prevent a wife from filing a "rape" charge against her husband (Gelles, 1976b); consequently, the issue of physically coerced sexual relations between husband and wife has remained hidden from public view and the research community. Occasional newspaper accounts of women who have slain their husbands because their husbands demanded sex or sex acts that the wives found repugnant testify to the importance of the issue, but we still have no idea about the incidence and nature of this side of family relations.

While the topic of pre-marital sex has been reasonably well researched (Kinsey, 1948; Hunt, 1973; Reiss, 1960), research on varieties of sexual relations in marriage appears to be underresearched compared to the attention devoted to pre-marital sex. Again, the issue may be one of intimacy and privacy which stands in the way of a social scientist studying sex within marriage.

There are numerous other issues and topics which are sensitive to study but which provide new and fundamentally important insights into the nature of family relations. In fact, one method of uncovering new sensitive issues is to monitor the popular literature forums where private and personal problems in marriage are discussed. Columns such as "Dear Abby" and "Ann Landers" along with

the personal columns found in magazines such as REDBOOK, GOOD HOUSEKEEPING, and WOMANS DAY provide informative insights into the backstage area of the family. An example of how useful this type of material is for stimulating research was related by a colleague who read an article in a woman's magazine by a woman who was married to a homosexual. In discussing this with friends our colleague learned that the same phenomenon was much more common than he first had realized and he was directed to someone who had experienced this and was willing to talk about it at length.

It would appear that there are numerous topics and issues which are important social problems and provide important insights into the fundamental nature of the family which have yet to be investigated. Furthermore, there also appears to be an abundance of information and data available on these topics once the research community can overcome the major obstacles and hurdles of sensitive topic research in the family.

METHODS OF STUDYING SENSITIVE ISSUES

As with other sensitive topic research, the first problem faced by students of the family who wish to focus their attention on a sensitive issue is that of locating data sources and/or cooperative subjects. This problem is exaserbated by the low base rate of most sensitive topic phenomena (such as wife abuse, child abuse, incest). Thus, probability sampling would mean prohibitive costs.[1] Unless a researcher has chosen to study a phenomenon with a high base rate or has an unlimited supply of capital and manpower, most sensitive issue research on the family is going to be carried out using non-probability sampling. The researcher then requires a mechanism to steer him to subjects where the informational

payoff will be the highest and where cooperation is not likely to be a major problem.

There are some proposed sampling methods which are well suited for taboo topic research on the family. The appropriate design will depend on the nature and goals of the research.

Sampling

Group Sampling. Group sampling was the technique pioneered by Kinsey and his associates in their study of sexual behavior (1948). The Kinsey researchers were able to use group sampling because they did not have to concern themselves with the problem of low base rates of the behavior in question. With the issue of wife-beating, incest, etc., the use of any functioning group as a sampling unit might not be particularly helpful. However, there are specialized functioning groups where group sampling would be an aid in reaching potential subjects. Special self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Parents Anonymous (for child beaters), and special women's groups might provide a number of subjects for sensitive issue research.

The major drawback of this sampling procedure is that it would identify a particular sub-portion of the population under study. People who abuse their children and admit to it in a self-help group are thought to be quite different in terms of social and personal characteristics than those individuals who do not admit their abuse of children to others or themselves.

Snowball Sampling. Snowball sampling, employed in studies of drug use (Goode, 1969), homosexuality (Humphreys, 1970), and professional gunmen (Polsky, 1969) facilitates research on sensitive issues because it allows the researcher to use one or two contacts and branch out the sample to a wider group of people. For instance, we discussed the marriage of a woman to a homosexual in an earlier

section of the paper. The one case was able to supply the names of a number of other women who had similar experiences. In a short time, a rather large list of names was brought up who had experienced this problem. Our research on family violence (which did not employ snowball sampling) often produced interviews with family members who discussed friends and relatives who had experienced violence in their marriage. It is likely that almost any topic is amenable to a form of snowball sampling.

A drawback of snowball sampling is that it taps individuals and families who are imersed in social networks. Some sensitive topics are not particularly suitable for this type of sampling. For instance, the literature on child abuse states that people who abuse their children are often socially isolated from friends and relatives. It would be difficult to use a snowball method of sampling when social isolation is a causal factor in the behavior in question.

Neighbor Informant. In 1965 NORC administered an interview (directed by David Gil, 1970) which asked subjects if they ever physically injured their children. Six of the 1,520 subjects answered in the affirmative. The survey also asked the question whether the subjects knew of a neighbor who had physically injured their child(ren). Forty-five answered in the affirmative, and Gil projected this to an estimate of between 2.53 to 4.07 million children physically abused each year (1970:59). This technique of estimating the incidence of child abuse has become known as the "neighbor informant technique". Basically, the technique acknowledges the problems of reliability and validity in getting people to self-report illegal or deviant behavior. This problem is overcome by getting some outside source who knows the family to report on behavior within the family unit.

While the neighbor informant technique is strong in estimating the incidence

or prevelance of certain sensitive issues, it has two major drawbacks. First, it is suitable for particular neighborhoods and sub-cultures. Where neighborhoods are marked by physical closeness and social openness, the neighbor informant technique is suitable. However, where physical closeness is low and privacy of family interaction high, neighbors are probably unreliable informants. In addition, neighbors may be able to aid in establishing incidence rates for particular phenomena, but the private and intimate nature of family units makes neighbors poor judges of certain familial qualities such as power or authority. Moreover, many neighbors are probably unable to provide accurate information about important social indicators such as education and age of their neighbor.

Family Informant. When a neighbor or someone outside the family has too little knowledge of what goes on in the home to aid the research project, an investigator might make use of an informant inside the family. This technique samples family members who provide information about what goes on between the other members of the family. Straus (1974a, 1974b, 1976) and Steinmetz (1974) surveyed college students and asked them to answer questions about violence in their families during their last year at home (senior year in high school). This technique allowed the investigators to get some insight into the level of intra-family violence and the causal variables associated with family violence.

While college students are captive audiences and have more knowledge about their own family than neighbors do, there are some limitations to this sampling procedure. First, as Landis (1957) and Berardo (1976) point out, there are real problems with the over-reliance on college students as research subjects. College students represent a particular and narrow segment of the population. By using college students to study family life, we restrict our ability to generalize about marriage and family life (Berardo, 1976:211). Secondly, family informants

might have limited knowledge about their own family life. They are unable to report about their parents' marriage during the early years (before they were born or when they were young), and they may have been sheltered from ceratin aspects of their family life. Taboo topics, by their very nature and sensitivity, may have been shielded from the children. Nevertheless, family informants are a lot closer to the core of family interaction than neighbors or others who might be asked for information.

Identifying Subjects from Public and Private Records

When a researcher wishes to investigate an issue in family relations but cannot use any of the previously mentioned methods of identifying and locating subjects, there are other methods which can be employed. Paradoxically, while the family is our society's most private institution, numerous transactions between family members become matters of public record. There are a number of public documents which can be utilized to identify and locate potential subjects for sensitive issue research.

Police Records. Most police departments keep logs of all police department activities. These logs, while often crudely coded, are usually open for public inspection (as with most organizations, police departments vary in their desire to cooperate with social scientists wishing to use "public" records). Gelles (1974; 1975b; 1976a) used the records of one police department to identify families where police officers had intervened in "family disputes" and developed a sample of twenty families who had been visited by police officers. In addition, some families were identified by examining the police log to identify cases where family members filed complaints of assault against another family member. The method of using police records, while allowing for the location of families,

has some drawbacks. First, the method depends on the cooperation of the department chief. Secondly, an officer usually has to be present to assure that no juveniles would be identified in the process of screening families. Lastly, police logs are far from the most accurate sources of data--addresses, names, and dates are often in error and a considerable amount of time can be wasted tracking down addresses which are non-existent or inaccurate.

Police Calls. The problem of getting cooperation from police officials often makes using official police records impossible. An alternative, which does not require cooperation, but which capitalizes on the new CB radio fad, is to monitor the radio calls of police departments. Although this technique is time consuming, it can yield a sample of families where disputes have taken place, where assaults occur, where child abuse is suspected, and where other matters requiring police attention occur. This method is dependent on being able to secure the operating frequencies of police departments and being able to decipher the codes used. Additionally, the method is time consuming, since calls must be monitored. The problem of faulty addresses and inaccurate information still prevails in this technique of locating families or individuals.

Newspapers. Newspapers (depending on region and area served) often provide interesting and informative material on families. We have examined a number of local and regional papers and have found a wealth of information which might be relevant for selecting cases for sensitive area research on the family. Some papers, for instance, list local police activities for the day or week. These listings would aid in locating families in conflict or who have particular attributes (quarrels, violence, etc.). In addition, papers which publish legal notices contain information of interest to social scientists. Listing of divorces and divorce decrees are published in many papers. We found that a recent issue

of THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL published divorce settlements which included statements that restraining orders had been issued against husbands/fathers seeing or visiting their families. Our research on family violence indicated that such restraining orders typically grow out of a wife's complaint that she or her children had been physically abused by the husband.

Private Agencies. Private agency case files are confidential information. However, if a researcher can work out an agreement with an agency to aid in research, agency records can become sources of subjects. In our own research on family violence we worked out an arrangement with a private social work agency by which to contact subjects. We told the agency what our research objective was and what type of subjects we needed. The agency then screened their files, and contacted subjects for their permission to be interviewed. When permission was granted, we interviewed families who the agency suspected of using violence on children. Studies of remarriage, multi-problem families, family conflict, child neglect, etc. could all use this method of locating families for research projects.

In addition to helping locate families for research, private agencies can be the primary sources of data on families. During our research on marital violence we were interested in the topic of marital rape. The problem was that since women cannot file a rape charge against their husbands, data on this issue are scant. We were interested in learning about the incidence and nature of physically coerced sex in marriage so we opted for surveying rape crisis centers and asking them what proportion of calls they handled were women claiming to be raped by their husbands. We also asked what the agencies knew about this issue. The data (Gelles, 1976b) helped us gain some insight into this previously uninvestigated topic.

Advertise. A final method for locating subjects is to place an advertisement in a magazine, newspaper, or professional journal stating what the research project involves and requesting people who desire to be subjects to contact the investigator. This technique is often facilitated by offering to pay subjects for their time. Prescott and Letko (1976) placed an advertisement in MS magazine and located forty women who were willing to fill out a questionnaire on wife beating. The drawbacks of this method are obvious since many people may respond to the advertisement as a lark. The representativeness of subjects located using this procedure is typically an unknown.

Data Collection: After Rapport What?

Once a sample of individuals or families has been obtained, the next major problem facing the investigator is to obtain valid and reliable data from the subjects. As we stated earlier, when the topic under investigation is one which is sensitive and emotionally charged, research subjects may be embarrassed to discuss the issue; they may perceive "demand characteristics" of the instrument or situation (Orne, 1962) and respond in a socially desirable manner; they may be insulted by the researcher's technique, approach, or questions and refuse to continue; or, as was feared by Humphreys (1970:41) the researcher who asks the wrong question may conclude the research with a series of beatings by subjects (thus provoking an entirely new topic for sensitive issue research--social scientist abuse).

The literature on sensitive issue research is limited to discussing the advantages of developing "rapport" with subjects in order to minimize the above listed risks and to maximize validity and reliability. However, rapport building is such an intricate interpersonal task, that many potential researchers are either scared off by the prospects of having to build rapport, or proceed

willy-nilly into the investigation overly dependent on their ability to get along with people.

This section of the paper lists and discusses techniques of data collection which go beyond rapport building and which have the promise of producing valid and reliable information.

Interviews. Perhaps the most difficult part of any interview on a sensitive topic is the point where the researcher has to face asking the respondent the key question or questions under consideration. No matter how much rapport may have been built up in the interview situation, most interviewers are not overly anxious to ask questions such as "have you stopped beating your wife?" and yet this type question is often crucial for the research.

We have identified a number of techniques for approaching and asking the more sensitive questions in research on the family. The first technique is a "funneling technique". This approach was employed in our exploratory study of intra-family violence (Gelles, 1974). The technique was an unstructured interview. However, the flow of the interview was designed to direct the discussion towards the issue of family violence. The interview began with a general discussion of the subject's neighborhood, friends and their families, and conflict and problems in their neighbor's families. Then the focus of the interview turned to the subject's family. General questions about conflict and problems were channeled toward questions about fights and ultimately violence.

The funneling technique was a method of allowing the interviewer to establish rapport with the subject while familiarizing the subject with the basic content of the interview. The discussion gradually was channeled towards the issue of violence, and in many situations the subject began to discuss violence without a direct question. In instances where violence was not discussed spontaneously,

the interviewer asked the direct question concerning the occurrence of violence in the family (see Gelles, 1974:36-43 for a detailed discussion of the funneling technique).

Conflict Resolution Technique. The "funneling technique" was highly adaptable to an unstructured interview. Such a technique may require modification for use in structured interviews with large samples. An example of a technique used in a sensitive area is the Conflict Resolution Technique developed by Straus (1974a;1976) for research on family violence. This technique was designed and first used with college student subjects, and it was adapted and implemented for adults in a national survey of violence in families.

The Conflict Resolution Technique is a list of modes of conflict resolution ranging from discusssing an issue calmly to using a gun or a knife. Each item asks if the mode was ever employed in the family and how often the mode was used during the past six months (or a year).

The advantages of this technique is that it accomplishes in a structured format, what the funneling technique accomplishes in the unstructured format--it funnels the interview from the least sensitive to the most sensitive questions. This funneling allows for the building of rapport and has the additional benefit of building the subject's commitment to the interview (e.g. well if I answered the last question, I can certainly answer this one).

Although the Conflict Resolution Technique has been used only in family violence research, it is highly adaptable to other sensitive issue research on the family.

Random Response Technique. No matter how good the rapport between the interviewer and the subject and no matter how successful the funneling technique employed, the researcher will eventually have to ask questions such as "Have you

abused your child?"; "Do you and your wife engage in anal intercourse?"; "Have you ever molested a child?"; "Have you ever used a gun on your wife?"

These questions are particularly important and at the same time particularly difficult to ask. Interviewers, no matter how well trained will often balk at asking such questions or ask them in a manner and with an inflection which suggests a "no answer" from the respondent. Subjects, on the other hand, may be embarrassed or afraid of answering the questions.

One manner of dealing with the problem of extremely sensitive questions is the Random Response Technique designed by Daniel Horvitz (1975). The technique works as follows:

> The respondent is given a sheet of paper with two questions on it. The respondent is also given a penny. The respondent is told to toss the penny. If the penny comes up "heads" the respondent answers the question marked "heads". If the coin comes up "tails" the respondent answers the "tails" question. Respondents are told not to tell the interviewer what side of the coin came up or what question they are answering. The respondent is to simply give an answer.

The two questions are constructed as follows:

> One question asks about the sensitive issue (e.g. Did you ever sexually abuse your child?); while the other question asks "Were you born in the month of June?"

The Random Response Technique allows the researcher to determine how many respondents answered the sensitive question in the affirmative by employing a statistical procedure which is based on the probability of the coin coming up "heads" half the time and "tails" half the time and the probability of a randomly selected respondent being born in the month of June. Needless to say, this is a complicated procedure, but Horvitz and others claim that the formula is reliable in estimating the incidence of affirmative answers to the sensitive question.[2]

The methodological advantage of the Random Response Technique is that the interviewer is blind in asking the question and receiving the answer. The interviewer does not know which question has been asked and answered and the subject knows that the interviewer will not know which question is being answered.

The disadvantage of this technique is its conception of the role of an interview subject. An interview subject will have to be extremely trustful of the technique to cooperate. We have argued that the technique works only with subjects who are too naive to believe they might be fooled and with subjects who have doctorates in statistics and believe the technique is truly random. All the rest of the subjects in between might be extremely skeptical of how "random" and anonymous the technique is.

Collaborative and Conjoint Interviews. A problem which is fairly common in all family research and particularly important in sensitive topic research is the reliance of a large proportion of research enterprises on the information provided by a single family member. Studies of family violence (Gelles, 1974; Straus, 1974) and studies of child abuse typically gather data by interviewing one member of a family. The problem with this is that it provides a single perspective on the issue in question. For example, a wife might consider a slap an instance of wife abuse while to the husband it may have been so insignificant that he would not remember it in an interview. The level and meaning of violence in that family will depend on who is interviewed. The same problem occurs when power in the family is measured.

A possible solution to the problem of single perspectives is the conjoint and collaborative interview. Laslett and Rapoport (1975) suggest that using a methodological technique which involves repeated interviews with several members of the same family, by more than one interviewer increases the internal validity

of the research and is particularly appropriate for research on the more private and intimate character of family life. LaRossa (1976) states that common problems with family research such as (1) dependence on female subjects, (2) over use of self-report measures, (3) heavy reliance on "one-shot"data collections, and (4) failure to treat marriage in a holistic manner can be solved by employing a conjoint interview procedure. This method will involve husbands as well as wives, yields behavioral as well as phenomological data, allows for the in-depth analysis of the marital world, and uses the marriage system level of analysis rather than the individual respondent level.

While LaRossa (1975) was able to fruitfully employ the conjoint interview in his study of first pregnancy, we found that this procedure had serious disadvantages when it came to a study of family violence. Our interviews on the subject of intra-family violence (Gelles, 1974) included four conjoint interviews. During the course of these interviews issues of conflict and disagreement arose and the couples tended to begin to argue and disagree over the "correct" answer to the question. We felt that there was a risk in using an interview procedure which had the possibility of raising conflict which might have boiled over into violence after the interviewer had left the house. While we had no evidence that this did or could happen, we felt that it was wiser to conduct interviews with a single family member.

Observations. Direct observation or participatory observation in studies of the family is time-consuming and expensive. In most studies which collected data through direct observation in the home, the sample size was small and the research focused on global interaction patterns in the family (see for example, Henry, 1971).

As stated earlier, sensitive issue research on the family involves add-

itional problems to the ones of time, cost, and small sample size. It is clearly out of the realm of possibility that a family will allow an investigator to make direct observations of sexual relations, violence, incest, or other volatile and private subjects. However, observation can be used to collect data on families who have already been identified as being suitable for inclusion in the study either as families where the behavior in question exists or subjects who would be comparative families to the others in the sample.

We propose that focused observaions in the home would enable the investigator to gather valuable behavioral data to compliment data which could be obtained through interviews and questionnaires. LaRossa found that the conjoint interview is also an opportunity to collect behavior data (1976). There are various situations where a focused observation could be employed. For example, if data on stress and how family members cope with stress is desired, an investigator might want to conduct observations of family interaction during dinner time. Bossard and Boll (1966:142) found that meals in the kitchen or dining room serve as the focal point of family interaction. This is one time of day when most family members are in the same room for a period of time. Additionally, meals are often stressful situations where conflicts and arguments can erupt and must be dealt with (Gelles, 1974:96-99). Data collected by observing family behavior during meals would be valuable and less costly than having to actually move into a household to conduct observations. The disadvantage of this procedure is that families might present a false front during the course of the observation; thus, preventing the observer from gaining an insight into the real nature of the family. The disadvantage might be reduced by repeating the observations over time so that the observer begins to blend into the family and his or her presence might not change the fundamental manner in which the

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family members interacted with one another.

Projective Techniques. One methodology which is particularly useful in studying controversial issues is the projective test (Selltiz, Jahoda, Deutch, and Cook, 1959). Projective techniques such as the Thematic Apperception Test, the Rorschach Test, the draw-a-picture test, and the complete-a-sentence test are presumed to allow the subject to project internal states onto objects and behaviors external to himself (Kerlinger, 1973:514).

Projective techniques have been used extensively in family research. Numerous studies use them when children are the subjects of research (see for example Radke, 1946; Kagan, 1958; Haworth, 1966). Children's perceptions of their parents have been studied by using line drawings and doll play (Cummings, 1952; Kagan, Hosken, and Watson, 1961). Projective tests such as the TAT and completion projects have been used with adults to study family related personality traits (Blum 1949), attitudes towards family members (Lakin, 1957), attitudes towards children (Meyer and Tolman, 1955), and family power (Straus and Cytrynbaum, 1961). Additionally, entire families have been the subjects in projective technique research designed to study familial perceptions (Alexander, 1952), and the direction of aggression in families (Morgan and Gairer, 1956).

Other researchers have designed projective tests to test for specific traits in the family. Edith Lord of the University of Miami developed a projective protocol which portrayed misbehaving children. The protocol varied the type of misbehavior and the age of the child (by having size vary). Lord administered the protocol to test for punitiveness in parents to gain some insight into the causes of child abuse. We have used a TAT projective device to test for the association of sex and violence in the fantasy production of college students (Gelles, 1975a).

The obvious advantage of a projective device is that it is a non-reactive

method of collecting data. A projective device disguises the true purpose of the research. On the other hand, projective techniques have been criticized for being so ambiguous that they reveal the internal states of the scorer rather than the subject. In addition, projective techniques concentrate on internal states and it is difficult to argue convincingly that one can predict external behavior from internal states.

Experimental Design. Experiments designed to examine sensitive topics in the family are limited by ethical and moral considerations in terms of the experimental manipulation the subjects are subjected to and the behavior which is being studied. Clearly, a researcher could not ethically design an experiment where the expected outcome was a parent beating a child. An additional limitation is that experiments using families as subjects typically involve some degree of observation. Since the research is usually conducted in the controlled setting of the investigator's laboratory, the family members will be interacting in a context quite a bit different from the privacy and familiarity of the home.

These limitations not withstanding, there are some experimental designs which are amenable for studying sensitive areas in the family. For instance, let's assume that a researcher was interested in testing the hypothesis that stress was a factor causally associated with aggression, modes of conflict resolution, or child abuse. The investigator might set up a true experimental design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963) where the variable "stress" was manipulated. The SIMFAM technique which has been used in studying problem solving (Straus and Rallman, 1971) has been found to be successful in simulating family crisis. If the "crisis" were manipulated the investigator might be able to examine the effects of crisis on family conflict resolution. Although one could not ex-

pect to observe behavioral violence, the investigator could use a projective technique to assess the families' level of internal aggression in the "crisis" or "no crisis" situation.

The advantage of the experimental design is that it allows for an explanatory analysis of the sensitive issues. Although experiments have been criticized for lacking correspondence to the real world, methodologists have argued that a valid experiment can be carried out even when the experimental variable is "phenomenally different" from events in the natural setting, as long as the experimentally produce variable is "conceptually similar" (Rieken, 1954; Straus, 1969).

The disadvantages posed by experiments arise when the experimental variables are not truly parallel to the real world. For instance, a researcher studying child abuse could have difficulty arguing convincingly that the experimental condition of depriving a child of candy was conceptually similar to physically abusing that child.

A Note on Validity

The preceeding section listed a number of alternative and innovative techniques which could be used to collect data on sensitive topics in the family. The rationale for listing these varied approaches was to move the discussion of sensitive topic research beyond the limited methodological dependence on rapport. Nevertheless, the innovativeness of the above techniques does not completely address the often heard criticism "but how do you know they told you the truth? (or "how do you know they didn't alter their behavior for the observation or experiment?") It is obvious that there is a need for validation studies to be carried out on the techniques employed in sensitive area research.

To date, such studies have been rare, and even proposals for validation studies are few and far between. Bulcroft and Straus (1975) carried out a validation study on the use of college students as inside informants on family conflict resolution. They found that when the same Conflict Resolution Technique was administered to both the student and a parent, there was a high level of agreement between the student and the parent on the CRT measure.

The "nomination technique" discussed in the sampling section of this paper might be validated by using official records to cross-check whether the neighbor reported for a particular behavior (child abuse, wife abuse) is known to police or social workers in the community. While this method of triangulation (Webb, et al. 1970) is workable for behaviors where there are legal prescriptions against the behavior and agents of control delegated the task of dealing with the problem, the cross-check method of validation will be useless for validating results on other behaviors such as marital rape.

Whatever the method of sampling selected and whatever form of data collection is employed, there will have to be attempts to validate such research if the results of sensitive area research on the family are to be taken seriously.

ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS IN SENSITIVE TOPIC RESEARCH ON THE FAMILY

There are additional problems to those encountered in sampling and data collection which impinge on the collection of data on sensitive family topics. This section reviews three important contingencies in family research on emotionally charged issues: 1. Federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects; 2. Problems with "hired hand" research; 3. Legal problems concerning

disclosure of information gathered in sensitive research.

Protection of Human Subjects

Researchers who do studies of sensitive topics which are funded by the federal government encounter contingencies posed by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare guidelines concerning the protection of human subjects.[4]

The purpose of the guidelines is to protect research subjects from physical or psychological injury which might arise as a direct or indirect consequence of the subjects' participation in research. While these guidelines tend to be directed towards medical or drug related research, they still apply to all federally funded projects with humans as subjects.

For the purpose of most social scientific investigations, the major guidelines which influence research on the family are the provisions which call for the subjects to give "informed consent" assuring that they have been given a full explanation of the project, a description of the risks involved, if any, a disclosure of alternative procedures which might be used, and an offer to answer any and all questions concerning the project. Additionally, subjects must be informed that they can withdraw from the project at any time (for detailed definition of "informed consent" see FEDERAL REGISTER, May 30, 1974, p. 18917.) Researchers must also guarantee (in their proposals) that potential risks to the subjects are outwieghed by the benefit to the subject and the importance of knowledge to be gained from the research.

The most important guideline which bears on sensitive topic research is that pertaining to "informed consent". Earlier versions of the guidelines called for "informed consent" to be obtained before data collection began and that "informed consent" had to be obtained in writing. It is obvious that this

poses some problems for research enterprises which depend heavily on the establishment of rapport and trust for valid and reliable evidence to be obtained. It would be difficult for a researcher to get a chance to establish rapport if s/he had to begin the research by stating that s/he was asking questions to learn about wife abuse, sexual abuse, incest, ect. Moreover, researchers who vowed that the data collected was to be kept strictly confidential would confront suspicious subjects who were then asked to sign their names to a legal form which to them might look like a release of information.

The potential problems posed by these guidelines have been alleviated by new interpretations of the guidelines and exceptions made by HEW officials which allowed some researchers to obtain complete "informed consent" at the end of the interview, questionnaire, or observation. In addition, such consent does not always have to be in writing.[5]

A problem with "informed consent" does arise if the researcher desires to have legal minors (under eighteen years of age) for subjects. In cases where children are to be the subjects for sensitive research "informed consent" must be obtained from the child's parents or guardians. In addition, the consent must be obtained prior to meeting with the child. This restriction virtually guarantees that children will not or can not be subjects in sensitive topic research. No researcher could guarantee that the child would not be at risk if s/he were being asked to report on the parents' sexual behavior or violent behavior and the parent knew the content of the research. Parents might give "informed consent" but still intimidate the child physically or psychologically after the interview. We know of no federally funded research in child abuse which is gathering direct interview or questionnaire data from children, and we conclude that the regulations protecting human subjects have produced this

situation.

Thus, researchers seeking federal funding for sensitive research must be aware that the federal guidelines and the disposition of college and university human subjects committees are factors which must be considered in any research design.

"Hired Hand" Research

The problems of rapport, confidentiality, ethics, validity, and reliability are difficult, but manageable facets of sensitive topic research so long as the research is small in scale and the investigator is involved in most of the aspects of the project. When research projects attempt to investigate emotionally charged issues in the family on a large scale, additional problems are created by virtue of having to employ other staff members for various parts of the project. Roth (1966) has listed and discussed the numerous problems involed in what he called "hired hand" research. He discussed "faking" of observations, collaboration among coders to make their results similar, interviewers completing interview schedules by themselves, and other problems. Large scale research projects usually develop mechanisms to "catch" the cheaters on their staffs, including call backs, comparing data of each interviewer to the group average, and reinterviews. Nevertheless, as Roth states (1966) such controls are often absent and controls, when they do exist are not sufficient to locate instances where interviewers did not take time to develop sufficient rapport, where interviewers used certain intonations when asking questions which assured "socially acceptable" replies, and where research staff members discuss confidential interview material at cocktail parties.

Thus, while large research projects can produce larger samples of families

with more ability to generalize from the data, the necessary division of labor in these projects and the necessity of using "hired hands" poses serious and often unimaginable risks to the validity, reliability, and ethical conduct of the research.

Confidentiality

One of the major steps which must be taken in sensitive topic research is to guarantee to the subjects that all data which is being collected will be kept confidential. While it is relatively simple to mask the identities of subjects in the writeups of case studies and statistical procedures used in analyzing and presenting data protect the identity of subjects, there is one potential problem which poses risks to the researcher and the subjects.

Although a number of social scientists have discussed problems associated with the right to keep information obtained in academic research confidential (Polsky, 1969), and some researchers have offered to serve as test cases which would determine whether a social scientist could keep his information private despite court orders, no clear precedent exists in this area.[6]

Thus, until the courts decide whether academicians can be granted immunity from having to release confidential data, researchers who engage in research which deals with illegal, sensitive, or taboo topics run the risk of being forced to turn over material which they pledged would be kept confidential, or engaging in legal battles, or spending some time in jail for contempt of court.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to identify the problems associated with

carrying out research on sensitive topics in the family and to list and discuss some solutions which can and have been implemented in the course of research on child abuse, wife abuse, family violence, and sexual behavior. This paper has not been an exhaustive presentation of all the methodologies which have been employed to study all the taboo topics in the family. Rather, the paper has been largely influenced and confined to methodological insights gained from our own research on family violence (Straus, Gelles, Steinmetz, 1973). Nevertheless, many of the issues and methods which have been associated with our research program on family violence are applicable to other types of sensitive research in the family.

A goal of this paper is to aid in moving research on the family into new and unexplored areas of family behavior. We believe that numerous topics of interest and importance have gone uninvestigated because researchers were stumped by the problems of finding subjecst, obtaining data, and establishing procedures for producing valid and reliable data.

The final question which arises concerning sensitive topic research is whether research like this should be done at all--irrespective of whether or not the major hurdles in doing the research can be bridged. Some may argue that the procedures and methods we discuss in this paper border on being unethical invasions of the privacy of the family. In addition, some might feel that there are areas in the family which are too private and too sacred and should not be investigated by "snooping" social scientific "voyeurs". Deception, ethics, morality, and the sacred nature of the family as a social institution are often cited as reasons not to carry out sensitive topic research.

While there are ethical and moral dilemmas involved in the methods discussed in this paper, we would counter the argument that certain topics should not be

investigated and that families should not be subjected to the "voyeurism" of family researchers by pointing out that the researcher community's respect for the privacy of the family and their unwillingness to investigate certain emotional or embarrassing topics did not prevent children from being abused, did not prevent wives from being abused, did not eliminate impotence, and did not enforce the incest taboo. Nor did the perceptual blinders that family researchers wore when viewing the family prevent myths and conventional wisdoms from being accepted as fact when scientific data on sensitive topics was lacking. If we are to learn more about the basic nature of the family and family functioning, and if we are to be capable of dealing with some of the fundamental social problems which exist in the family, we must be prepared to take the risks in the study of sensitive topics and to seek creative and humane solutions to the ethical problems of such research.

FOOTNOTES

1. For example, if one were going to study child abuse, the estimated base rate is one-half of one percent of the population (this is likely to be a conservative base rate). Assuming that one wanted to conduct an incidence survey with a high level of accuracy, the sample which would have to be drawn would be quite large--assuming a base rate of .005 and a desired confidence level of 95%, the sample size which would guarantee an accurate survey would be 76,448. At $40 per in-person interview, this survey would cost $3,057,920 (from the Abt Associates technical proposal for RFP No. HEW/OCD 105-76-1137).

2. The Random Response Technique was proposed by Burt Associates as a means of determining the incidence of child abuse in America. Marvin Burt, President of Burt Associates, informed us in a personal communication that the Random Response Technique has been pre-tested and works quite well in obtaining answers to sensitive questions.

3. It is also possible that the presence of an observer at the dinner table could heighten stress during the meal and provide a more focused opportunity to observe family interaction under stress.

4. For the complete statement on the rules and regulations concerning the protection of human subjects in government funded research see the FEDERAL REGISTER, Volume 39, Number 105, Part II, May 30, 1974.

5. We have received these waivers from obtaining informed consent in two research projects. There is however, no guarantee that such a waiver would be granted in all instances of sensitive research.

6. On May 20, 1976 United States District Judge Charles B. Renfrew of California ruled that a Harvard professor did not have to disclose information obatined confidentially in the course of academic research.

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